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How to Set Up a Self Organized Learning Environment (SOLE) at Home

SOLE refers to a Self Organized Learning Environment. It is the brainchild of Sugata Mitra, Professor of Educational Technology at Newcastle University in the UK. Through SOLE, children direct the learning process and follow pathways that many of the traditional educational approaches do not make room for. SOLE relies on the use of technology, collaboration and encouragement as the basis for encouraging learning. Wherever you're able to connect to the internet, whether at home, school or in the community, SOLE can be used as the way of learning for your children. Setting it up at home is a simple process, but it's important that you're an engaged part of the process.

Method 1 Understanding Your Role

1. **Be aware of how important your role is as parent, guardian or carer.** In your household, the way in which you perceive education influences how your children see it. If you care about lifelong learning, your enthusiasm for it will be evident in all that you do and say. Your enthusiasm for learning sets the tone in the household and ensures that the tools for learning are always available. Your role is vital in encouraging and praising your children for the self-directed learning achievements that they make.

2. **Be curious.** More than anything else, your role is about asking questions that prompt learning journeys. By asking questions, you invite your children to wonder and to ask the same questions in ways that allow them to set off and discover the answers that they don't yet have. Asking questions teaches children that there is no such thing as a stupid question and that it is through questions that we learn more about each other and our world. Any time that nobody in your household has the answer to a question, there is a perfect opportunity to have the children learn what they can about the matter and then tell *you* what the answer is.
   - Help your children to formulate questions themselves. Through your example of being a question-asker, they will learn to process the things they don't know as a challenge to find out and not be afraid to ask questions too.
   - Questions help to inspire the curiosity of your children and encourage them to engage in learning. Teach them not to be afraid of the unknown or a lack of knowledge.

3. **Be engaged.** SOLE is an opportunity to participate in your child's learning. It doesn't replace schooling; instead, it teaches how to bring learning to life wherever a child is, and reinforces school learning. By being prepared to actively encourage learning in your home environment, you help your children to develop a lifelong love for learning and you also help your children to feel comfortable about sharing ideas and information with others. Most of all, it is about teaching children that learning is enjoyable, not a chore. And you'll be learning too, as you see your children discover things for themselves and bring the learning back to you.

4. **Consider who can participate.** You might want to set up a SOLE activity for your own children. But you might also like to set one up for their friends or for neighbor's children as well. Consider asking other children if you have the space as this will help to ignite the love of learning beyond your home space too and can show all children that learning is fun.

Method 2 Setting Up SOLE at Home

1. **Get the basic equipment.** Here's what you need to get started:
   - A laptop or a desktop computer. Approximately one per four children is needed, although in the home environment, this will depend on the availability of computers and how the children like working together.

- Paper and pens. This lets children take notes to share. Remember too that writing on paper has a mind and body connection that is different from typing, and many creative people insist that this connection sparks different ways of thinking, so encourage both.
- Webcam, microphone, creative software for graphics manipulation/videos/music making, etc.

2 **Set aside SOLE time.** Approximately half an hour to an hour will be needed for your first SOLE session. Choose a time that is relaxed, when school homework is out of the way and when your child or children are likely to be engaged.

- You might like to treat this as special time spent together, as you might read quietly nearby or simply be present somewhere in the vicinity. Or, you can get on with the cleaning or cooking while your children are happily investigating the answers (the investigation stage is hands-off, although keeping an eye on progress is recommended).

3 **Choose a comfortable learning environment.** Switch off the TV and any other electronic distractions not related to the computers being used for research. Have the children sit or hang out somewhere that is comfortable and enjoyable in the home. This is a fun experience, so it's important for the children to feel comfortable.

Method 3 Planning the SOLE

1 **Follow the approach of question, investigation and review.** This simple approach gives plenty of room for discovery, research, creativity, analysis and conclusions.

2 **Determine a question.** Make the question an exciting one that sparks the imagination and interest of the child or children. The best questions tend to be those that are large, open-ended, difficult and interesting:

- Encourage children to consider theories rather than concrete answers. If the question seems unanswerable, children will be encouraged to posit many possibilities, pushing their thinking boundaries. Nothing is too fantastical or difficult for a child to tackle if you have faith in their ability to get on with discovery.
- Broader, harder questions promote deeper and longer discussions.
- Consider using a mix of familiar things and less well known things. For example, you may have pets, a garden or noisy neighbors. Questions you could ask about these include things like: "Why did cats decide to live with humans?", "Can a garden be a source of health?" or "Why do some noises annoy us more than others?" Then you can ask bigger picture questions, such as "Can we use weeds to fuel our cars?" or "What was Ancient Greece really like?".
- For many ideas of good questions, check How to formulate questions for SOLE activities.

3 **Provide a prompt to accompany the question.** There are many possibilities here, such as reading a brief information sheet, showing a video, playing music or audio, showing images, etc., all things related to the question. Basically, look for something that sparks curiosity and causes the child to want to dig deeper and look for the solutions.

Method 4 Your First SOLE activity

1 **Set aside approximately an hour.** You might need a little more or less time—that depends on the question, the context and the children involved.

2 **Explain what SOLE is all about.** The first time you perform a SOLE investigation, you'll need to chat a little about the process and what it means. In your own way, make it clear that this is fun, not a chore.

- If working with more than one child, delegate a "helper" child. This child is responsible for delegating within the group, such as resolving issues, problem-solving, etc. This, in itself, is an important learning process in helping others to get along. For one to two children, this role is not needed, although you may wish to provide question-driven guidance on occasion.

3 **Ask the question (see above).**

4 **Set aside about 40 minutes for the investigation part of the SOLE activity.** If you are working with only one child, have him or her set off online to find the answers to the question. If you have several children, have them work together.

- Ask the children to keep records of their investigation. This can be notes, photos, quotes, audio recordings, drawings, diagrams, print-outs, etc.—basically, whatever they feel documents the investigation in the way that explains their findings.

5 **Review.** After the 40 minutes are up, ask the children to come back to you. Choose a comfortable place to sit down together and talk about the investigation. Your role is to facilitate the discussion. Ask more questions and listen actively:

- Ask the participants what they felt about the experience.
- Ask the participants what they felt they did well during the investigation, including noting what others did well. And ask them what they'd do differently the next time—it's as important to learn about what doesn't work as much as what does.

Method 5 Future SOLE activities

1 **Continue using SOLE in your home as a part of your children's regular activities.** You can implement SOLE beyond your home too, such as when you travel as a family, when you are out and about and when you are stuck in a traffic or a long queue. There are always opportunities to use SOLE, provided you can access the internet.

- Use outings to promote SOLE learning at home. For example, if you and your family visit a museum, art gallery or similar place, or you go and see a movie or watch a sports match, you can use these as a basis for asking questions about things observed or not understood related to the event.

2 **Increase the complexity of the questions as your children grow older.** SOLE is great for ages 8-12. During these years, your children's thinking abilities will change quite a lot, and you'll find that giving questions in greater complexity as your child grows older will help challenge them more.

- You could also continue the SOLE activities for older children but this will likely depend on the level of schoolwork and other activities that they're engaged in. Hopefully by this stage, having used the SOLE process will set older children in good stead for deeper self-directed learning in their curriculum studies, as they will draw on the skills learned from your home-initiated SOLE activities.

Tips

- SOLE experiences will always vary depending on the composition of the learning group, the children's enthusiasm and the questions they're pursuing. Some of the things that you might need to deal with may include:
    - One member of the group complains that another member isn't doing anything to help: Ask the helper to facilitate getting both children re-engaged. The ability to not run to an adult is part of the learning process.
    - One member of the group appears disinterested and unwilling to participate: Ask the helper to facilitate re-engaging and have the children understand that they can make changes as the investigation goes along. If you're ever investigating with several groups, children can also change groups, but this is usually only a useful solution for school or classroom situations.
    - The answer isn't correct. This is a good opportunity to explore what sources the children used and why they came to the conclusion that they did; it's a fantastic opportunity to teach critical thinking skills about why the children didn't discard information that isn't actually credible or reliable.
    - There are squabbles over the computer availability: Help them to discuss ways of sharing the computer—let them find their own solutions by asking them questions about how to resolve it.
    - The helper isn't behaving: Suggest ways that can help the helper to manage the group. If you need to discuss difficult

behavior, do so away from other participants and always praise the good things that the helper did.

- Some children might find the material that returns in online research too difficult. Children can be encouraged to either research other sites or to put things into their own words as best they can. The skill of translating official or challenging language into more comprehensible language is very useful in itself. Images and diagrams can also help children to break down difficult information into something they find easier to handle.

Sources and Citations

- http://www.ted.com/pages/prizewinner_sugata_mitra – research source